Castlemaine Naturalist
February 1997
Vol 21.1 #230

Enigmas Explained

One of the main advantages I have found in retirement from the workforce is my ability to spend much more time on our property in Castlemaine.

There have been a few enigmas which my new found freedom has allowed me to solve. The first was the puzzle of the lowering water level in a large bucket which catches the excess water from the green-house. From time to time we had observed the White-winged Choughs sitting on the rim of the bucket (which is about two feet high) to drink.. However, the considerably lowered water level could not be explained by chough imbibing. My scanty knowledge of physics and phenomena such as centres of gravity led me to believe that a drinking chough, of even the most acrobatic kind, could not lower the water to the observed level without falling in. No, there had to be another explanation - and I had already dispensed with the evaporation hypothesis.

One recent evening about dusk I heard a low grumble or growl from the direction of the green-house. On peering out of the window I saw about six kangaroos of various ages queued at the bucket. As I watched each one took its turn to drink, then moved on. All very orderly.

Another puzzle which at last has been solved is that of a pair of Striated Pardalotes. Several weeks ago they displayed mating behaviour. He sat on a rafter of our verandah and puffed out his chest, she came flitting to his call. Much discussion ensued about a nesting site. We were rather disappointed when no nest seemed to have been built. We assumed another site had been selected. The birds continued to zoom in and out of the verandah at a great rate, so we consoled ourselves by believing that they were probably finding insects with which to feed themselves, and eventually their young, at another location. What a surprise to see him, with a beakful of tucker, slip under the corrugated roof and disappear. We are now anxiously awaiting the appearance of the fledglings. When they leave the nest it will certainly be a case of sink or swim - or should I say, fly or fall - straight to the brick paving below, as there is no safe settling place for learner fliers.

The 'roos regularly use our front garden for grazing - usually eating the grass. Recently I noticed hardenbergia, Grevillia alpina and Storksbill being pruned by a Black Swamp Wallaby. The wallaby has make frequent visits to our property, but has always kept well clear of the house. I suppose the succulent meal offered in the garden helped it overcome its timidity.

Natalie de Maccus

Reduced Rabbit Numbers

The effects on some predators

Part of the Sutton Grange Landcare Group's Research into rabbit control has been a limited investigation into fox, feral cat and raptor populations correlated with surveys in earlier years for other purposes.

On one of the largest properties a careful fox survey in Nov. 1985 revealed 13 active breeding dens, and 19 in 1989. At this time the same property carried high rabbit numbers and supported at least two full time rabbit shooters. This year, after a the rabbit control program had resulted in greatly reduced numbers, a less extensive search found 11 breeding dens.

At Sutton Grange it is believed that breeding Brown Goshawks seem to rely on young rabbits for food. Food litter at nest sites is reported to be composed almost wholly of rabbit remains. In Spring 1992 a 2 day search on the above property revealed 9 active nests. The same search in November '96 failed to locate a single active nest, although 6 adult birds were seen. Breeding pairs of Wedge-tailed Eagles and Whistling Kites were present on the property in the 1980's but were not seen in '96. I frequently see pairs of Wedge-tails over my house now and believe they are far more noticable than when I first moved here a decade ago. Perhaps the larger raptors are readily able to move to accommodate food availability?

In 1986 a count taken as part of a simulated rabies eradication program revealed 21 cats and 50 foxes on the property. Recent spotlight counts of feral cats throughout the Landcare area revealed unexpectedly low numbers. The maximum number of cats spotted in any one transect count (50 - 130km) was 4!

Margaret Hunter

The Wise Old Owlets

When we first arrived at Barkers Creek I made three nesting boxes out of an old hollow tree trunk and fastened them to trees within easy sighting of our family room so that we could watch and learn about our feathered friends.

The first visitors to arrive and check out the accommodation were our ever busy and territorial Crimson Rosellas. They soon decided to reject the nearest box. We noticed they would settle onto the perch I provided for each box, look into it and then back off very quickly. No longer did they enter the box and move around inside. It seemed strange to us, but when a pair of Crimson Rosellas moved into the next box and proceeded to nest, we forgot abour their strange behaviour.

Weeks later we noticed an animal (?) peering out of the first and nearest box. But that was a false guess, so out with the bird books and we decided we had an Owlet Nightjar as one of our tenants. Since then we have become very close to the new neighbours.

They seem to us like they are the proverbial "Wise Old Men". All that is missing are their pipes as they sit in their holes peering out, not quite asleep, contemplating the world. We can even picture them as old retired residents sitting in comfortable chairs on their porches of their inner suburban cottages, not missing any gossip.

The plural is needed because we now have four boxes occupied by the owlets and their family. These small non-aggressive birds have progressively taken over all the boxes nearest to our house. The closest box has a family of three young birds and, we presume, mum and dad have moved each into their own flat, for peace and quiet.

We would miss them if they moved away because they are there each morning to greet us and watch us as we have breakfast and to be present throughout the day.

Occasionally, as we go to bed, we hear them call out as if to wish us goodnight.

They have become our friends.

John Turnbull

Sandon Birds, Nov/Dec '96

Australian Wood Duck
Pacific Black Duck N
Little Black Cormorant N
White-faced Heron D
Wedgetailed Eagle N
Little Eagle
Brown Falcon
Masked Lapwing
Galah
Long-billed Corella
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Crimson Rosella
Pallid Cuckoo N
Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo N
Shining Bronze-cuckoo
Kookaburra
White-throated Tree-creeper
Wren
Spotted Pardalote
Striated Pardalote

Speckled Warbler (3) D
Weebill
Brown,
Buff-rumped,
Yellow-rumped, and
Striated Thornbills
Red Wattlebird
Yellow-faced, N
Yellow-tufted N and
Brown-headed Honeyeaters
Jacky Winter N
Scarlet Robin N
White-browed Babbler N
Rufous Whistler
Grey Shrike-thrush
Australian Magpie-lark D
Restless Flycatcher N
Grey Fantail
Willie Wagtail
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
Olive-backed Oriole (h) D
Australian Magpie
Grey Currawong
Australian Raven
White-winged Chough
European Goldfinch D
Mistletoebird D
Welcome Swallow

N = November only, D = December only

Susanna Starr

Nature of Chewton

Over the last two years a chap out at Chewton has been observing birds and animals in the area around the dams and replantings near Wattle Gully mine as well as near his own house - probably about 4 hectares altogether. This is the list he has come up with, along with some of his comments. Not recorded here are still a number of unconfirmed sightings, and unidentified species.

BIRDS

Crested Pigeons (new) Adelaide St (two pair)
Grey Thrush, seasonal
Grey Fantails, seas.
Pardalotes, seas.
Blue Wrens, residents, all year
Crimson Rosellas, res., a.y.
Eastern Rosellas, declining, possibly because of -
*Indian Mynahs, increasing
Galahs, res. a.y.
Magpies, White-backed, res.,a.y.
Magpie, 1 Black-backed, res.,a.y.
Kookaburras, increasing, a.y.
Common Bronzewings, a.y.
White-faced Herons, a.y.
Yellow-rumped Thornbills, seas.
Striated Thornbills, seasonal
Weebills, rare
Scrubwrens, increasing, seas.
Wattlebirds, a.y.
Yellowfaced Honeyeaters, seas.
New Holland Honeyeaters, seas.
Eastern Spinebills, seas.
Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters, rare
Golden Whistlers, occasional
Rufous Whistler, occas.
Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, seas.
Long-billed Corellas, seas.
Welcome swallows, seas.
Silvereyes, seas.
Mudlarks, occas.
Wedgetails, seas.
Brown Treecreeper, rare
White-throated Treecreeper, seas.
*Goldfinches, seas.
*House Sparrows, increasing
Red-browed Finches, seas.
Willie Wagtails, seas.

Eastern Shrike-tits, seas.
Reed Warblers, occas.
Pipits
Mistletoe Birds, occas.
*Starlings, incr.
*Blackbirds, incr.
Pacific Black Ducks, common
Wood Ducks, comm.
Little Australasian Grebe, seas.
Little Pied Cormorant, seas.
Great Black Cormorant, rare
Masked Lapwings (inc.a rather aggressive pair)
Eastern Swamp Hens, new res.
Black-fronted Dotterels, occas.
Grey Currawong, seas.
Black-shouldered Kite, seas.
White-winged Choughs, comm.
Tawny Frogmouths
Rainbowbirds (h)

A Magpie was seen to take a wren, but the wren seemed to be unable to fly properly - possibly a sick bird. (As a child I was distressed to see Magpies killing another member of the flock, but, as my father explained when he went to see what was going on, the bird was sick with roupe. It seems Magpies will kill sick birds from their own flock, and possibly other sick birds as well? Ed.)

ANIMALS

Tuan (Brush-tailed Phascogale)
Swamp Wallabies
Grey Kangaroos, incr.
Echidnas
Tiger Snakes
Brown Snakes
Lots of frogs
*Foxes, incr.!!
*Rabbits, incr.!!

Footnote - There are heaps of obviously domestic cats and dogs running around unsupervised.

R.P.

Recording Unusual Sightings

Members often report unusual sightings of birds or animals, but these go no further than our own circle if we don't register them officially. The Club has forms from the Atlas of Victorian Wildlife, and the Bird Observers' Club of Australia that seek specific information, such as map reference, altitude, sighting conditions, habitat, activity of bird/animal while it was being observed, etc.

On submitting these details your interesting record then becomes a valuable reference resource for the use of all Victorians.

Susanna Starr.

Observations

* A fox was seen with a white-winged Chough. Also noted were masses of weeds - due to the rain, or perhaps to the rabbit calcivirus? N. de Maccus

* George Evans reported that lots of rabbits are still around in the vicinity of the Maldon Railway. However Marg. Hunter commented that

the Calcivirus is very patchy in its extent.
* Sulphur-crested Cockatoos are around Little Hampton where there were none 40 or 50 years ago. It was questioned whether the change in land use to oats, grass seeds etc. might be the cause. Also, a Buff-banded Rail was seen in Stan's sister's garden in Mentone. It had possibly taken refuge because of injury. S. Bruton
* Fifteen Lorikeets were seen at Vaughan Springs cemetery. P. Garrett Many have been seen around North Castlemaine this year, mainly Musk, but some Purple-crowned, too. R. Mills There seems to be a great many in the district generally.
* The Yellow gums have masses of blooms this year but are being knocked about - by lorikeets? G. Broadway
* On Jan. 17 33 white-faced herons were counted on a swamp on the Campbelltown-Moloort road. There were also 6 White-necked Herons and 3 Yellow-billed Spoonbills, as well as a number of Masked Lapwings. R. Mills.
* Peter Skilbeck, via Susanna Starr, reported a pair of Nankeen Kestrels raised 3 young at "Plaistow".
* Blue devils (Eryngium rostratum) were seen mid-January along the Moorlort/Campbelltown road. R. Mills
* M. Oliver reported a Fantail Cuckoo along the creek near Yandell St., also New Holland Honeyeaters in her garden in Gaulton St. Eight White-browed Babblers were seen on the Thursday excursion to Tullaroop.
* Three Grey-crowned Babblers seen at the Castlemaine Golf Course. This is a small family group, and, to breed up, bigger families are needed. The birds need both trees and shrubs or sapplings. M. Dredge.
* B. Envall was told of a baby Kookaburra, still with its egg-tooth, which kept falling out of its nest near the Harcourt Motel. Someone kept putting it back, and "mum" was feeding it but she didn't know what the eventual outcome was. At her own place at Harcourt a pair of Grey Currawongs has been feeding young.
* Rufous Whistlers have been very vocal at Little Bendigo, and New Holland Honeyeaters have been very active in an exotic Erethina bush, which has large red pea flowers. They were even lining up along the branches. The bush had been under threat of removal, but now Chris is not so sure! C. Morris.

Brolgas in the District

Lorraine Rye has again reported Brolgas between Campbelltown and Tullaroop. The pair has been sighted in the same swamp four times in the past 12 months. On the 17th of January Rita and Doug Mills saw 5 Brolgas on the same swamp. A number of sightings have also been made of a pair at Bell's Swamp late December and early January, but the last report was on the evening of Tues Jan 7. All the sightings made

over the last 12 months suggests that at least two or three pair are taking up residency on the swamps of Moloort Plain.

A further report from Maggie Oliver and Kay Turner for Jan. 24 - *seven* Brolgas were seen on the swamp on the Campbelltown road. At first all they could see were sheep, until Maggie realized that one of the sheep had a long neck, and that there were actually seven of them! The friends of the Brolgas group are wanting reports on banded birds, but bands are a little hard to see when the birds are 2 or 3 hundred metres away and knee deep in swamp grass!

To quote from the Friends newsletter - "As a result of the recent release into the wild of captive reared Brolgas there are now a number of banded Brolgas about in Victoria. Anyone sighting Brolgas with brightly coloured leg bands please pass on your information (include colours and sequence on leg) to Phillip DuGuesclin at Colac on 03 5233 5581)"

Club News

The **trees planted** by the Club last year are growing well. George Broadway has undertaken to keep them watered until the Autumn rains.

A copy of our **response to the draft Environment Strategy Plan** is available from the Club. About 10 club members got together and went through the draft plan and came up with the response.

Re the **Significant Plants** form that was in the December Newsletter. Please be on the lookout for plants whch fit the description on the form **and make a report, - and hand it in!** So far only one entry has been made, and this is very frustrating for those who are working on the project. Kevin Walsh, of the Botanical Gardens, has agreed to help us, too.

Note that from Friday March 10 the General Meetings will be held in the Uniting Church hall, as it is no longer feasible to meet at Continuing Education.
Further information re this arrangement will be given at the February meeting.

Forthcoming Great Dividing Trail Public Walks
Saturday 22/2 **Over the Top,** 4-5 hours, Leader Ed. Butler. Meet Lake Daylesford Boathouse.
Sunday 11/3 **Abandon Hope,** 2-3 hours. Leader Pat Hope. Meet Ballarat R/way Station.
WALKS START AT 9.30 am. Bring snacks, food, water. Further details- Ed Butler 03 5348 2367 (BH) or Pat Conroy 03 5348 2825 (AH)

C . F . N . C . PROGRAMME

N.B. Excursions leave promptly at times stated.

Fri Feb. 14 **Swamp Vegetation** Speaker is Ern Perkins. **This is the Annual Meeting.** 8pm, Continuing Education, Templeton St.

FROM THE MARCH MEETING GENERAL MEETINGS WILL BE HELD IN THE UNITING CHURCH HALL. Either turn in just behind the Art Gallery in Lyttleton St. and park in the area down from the hall, which is closer to Mostyn St. or turn up the drive behind the Church and park there, or park in Mostyn St. and walk up the steps just behind the Mostyn St. surgery.

Fri Mar. 14 **Butterflies** Speaker is Gary Sobey of Skydancers.

Sat Mar. 8 **Launch of the Shire Conservation Strategy Plan,** beginning with a barbecue lunch. For details watch for notice in the local papers.

Sat Mar. 15 **Skydancers Butterfly House,** Midland Highway, Harcourt. Leave CHIRP, 13 Mostyn St. 1.30pm or meet at Skydancers at 1.40pm.

Fri Apr. 11 **Peregrine Falcons,** Vic Hurley, RAOU. Research grant. 8pm Uniting Church hall.

Fri May 9 **Ants of the Ironbark Forests** , Simon Hinkley, Museum of Victoria. 8pm Uniting Church Hall.

Sat May 10 **Autumn Overnight Excursion to Alan Reid's property, "Glenburn".**

Fri June 13 **Frogs,** Graeme Watson, Museum of Victoria. 8pm Uniting Church hall.

Fri Oct 10 **Plants of the Ballarat District,** Pat and Bill Murphy, Ballarat F.N.C. 8pm, Uniting Church hall.

Sat Oct 11 **Local Plants**

Sat Oct 18 **Excursion to Ballarat,** all day.

* *

Committee: C. Morris (Pres.), G. Broadway (V.P.), M. Willis (Corrosp. Sec.), B. Envall (Treas.), K. Turner, R.Mills (P.O. & N/L Ed.), E. Perkins, M. Oliver (Minute Sec.), B. Maund, J. Hewetson, M. Dredge.

Meetings:-

General - Second Friday every month (except Jan) at **Uniting Church hall, Mostyn** St. (From the March meeting)

Business - Held on the 4th Thursday every month (except Dec.) at 38 Campbell Street at 7.30pm. **All Members are invited to attend.**

Subscriptions - recommended for 1997 **(To be discussed at the Annual Meeting)**

Ordinary Membership: single $16 Family $24

Pensioner/Student: Single $10 Family $16.

Supporting $25

Newsletter posted: Membership + $6

****

****

Castlemaine Field Naturalists' Club Inc.
P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.